

## **Fast disappearing**

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**By Anna King Herald staff writer**

They are right on the edge. Burrowing owls, once common in the Tri-Cities, are now becoming much harder to find.

They are listed as a "federal bird of concern" by the Fish and Wildlife Service and could be placed on the federal or state endangered species list if numbers dwindle much further.

In the real estate fight between owls and people, the petite feathery fowl are losing.

The small birds prefer to live in underground burrows that have been dug and abandoned by animals like ground squirrels and badgers. But they've also moved into dried-up drainage pipes, pavement overhangs and upturned 5-gallon buckets.

"We've had about 15 percent of our burrows destroyed annually in the Tri-Cities," said Courtney Conway, a research biologist working for the U.S. Geological Survey. "That's much higher than in some of my other study sites."

Burrowing owls are considered endangered in California and in other states, Conway said, and "in Canada they are estimating annual declines of 20 percent per year. ... That's dramatic."

During the past four years Conway and a team of research assistants have been keeping careful watch over owls in the Tri-Cities and Arizona. The research is supported by the Bureau of Land Management and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. And by officials of the Hanford Reach National Monument and the Mid-Columbia River Refuges, in Pasco.

Studying the owls helps the national and state agencies decide whether further protection is needed for the tiny creatures, Conway said.

Conway and his small team of self-described "owl nerds" are funded for another year, but they hope to continue longer if possible.

"The longer it goes, the more accurate study we can have," said Claire Sanders, a biological technician for the owl study.

When the owls return to Washington from their winter migration in mid-February, the researchers follow. To identify and track them, they band all of the adult and juvenile owls they can find.

They believe the owls migrate south for the winter, but no one really knows where they go, Sanders said. Some Tri-City owls were found on the Oregon Coast and one even flew all the way to San Francisco, she said.

Conway thinks they might fly to Mexico, but it's difficult to know exactly where they winter since the owls are too small for satellite transmitters, Sanders said.

Finding the owls' wintering grounds is very important, because their homes there may be in danger too, Conway said.

"There is an obvious need to link up wintering grounds with breeding grounds so we can find out whether the problems in the wintering grounds are creating (population) declines in their breeding grounds," he said.

Sometimes the researchers have a hard time finding the owl burrows. Many of the nesting sites are found with the help of local residents and word-of-mouth.

"If they are not nesting by roads, they are pretty hard to find," Sanders said.

Taking up residence near busy roads has its ups and downs.

The parents can perch on road signs to scope out prey and watch over their young.

"We spend a lot of time catching and banding them, only to come back in a week and find the birds (dead) in the road," Sanders said.

It's hard to find other species of owls during the day, but burrowing owls stick close to home. Fending off other owls and predators requires pairs to hunt close and keep a watchful eye on their nest. Sunrise and sunset are their most active times.

"Burrows are a limited resource. That's why they stand in front of it all day," Conway said. Owls also like to live near more than one burrow, Sanders said, because trying to escape from predators and dealing with rambunctious growing owlets is easier with a little extra room.

While the female incubates her clutch of eggs, the male will guard the burrow entrance and hunt nearby.

The beating sun usually bleaches out his feathers and he becomes a lighter color than his smaller mate. A breeding female will usually lay about seven to eight eggs a year, but not all the owlets live to see adulthood.

Established burrows are important for the owls because they can't create their own, Sanders said. And many owls will return year after year to the same burrow in the Tri-Cities.

The Lower Columbia Basin Audubon Society and others have tried to restore burrows lost by development. Since 1997 they have created about 250 artificial burrows.

The manmade homes are built using an upturned 5-gallon bucket with a plastic tube leading to it as a tunnel. Both are buried under in the earth.

"(We thought) if you build them they will come," said Charlotte Reep, the society's burrowing owl project coordinator. "But that really hasn't been the case."

Of all the artificial burrows, only a few have been used successfully to raise young, she said.

"If you put these burrows where owls are already nesting they will use them, Sanders said.

But if the burrows are not built in traditional living areas, they will often remain empty.

Some of the owls seem tolerant of the encroaching development, and have used human activity to their advantage.

"Owls really like golf courses and airports, because they keep the grass really short and they can see over it," Sanders said.

The artificial burrows have to be carefully maintained, Reep said. Dirt, rocks and other obstructions to the artificial nest could keep owls away.

Artificial burrows offer some hope, but can't replace the natural homes, Reep said.

Saving owl habitat is a hard battle to win in the Tri-Cities, said Paul LaRiviere, area habitat biologist for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act protects the bird and the nest from harm while they are in their nest.

"(But) once the owls leave the nest, it's just a hole in the ground," he said.

It's a gray area of the law, LaRiviere said. As long as the birds' nests or eggs are not destroyed, it's hard to prove direct harm to the owls.

This was the case nearly three years ago when Wal-Mart wanted to build a new megastore in south Kennewick, right in prime owl habitat. The company promised long-term help for the owls, but hasn't followed through, he said.

The company initially replaced the lost nests, but little else was done, LaRiviere contends.

But there is hope.

Since the Wal-Mart incident, the city of Kennewick has improved its development policies to help protect nesting owls, LaRiviere said.

"As long as they don't destroy the burrows themselves, which happens a lot in the Tri-Cities, they can survive," Conway said.

Homeowners and developers could compromise and find ways to live together with the owls, LaRiviere said.

"We can get both," he said. "We can have development, but still protect some of these owl habitats."